

(December 29, 2008) Suburban Life: Some towns prepare for more trains, others anticipate less rail

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After a yearlong fight, communities along the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railway are now preparing for the increase in train traffic that will come with Canadian National Railway's purchase of the little-used rail line.

The federal Surface Transportation Board approved the deal Dec. 24, clearing the way for Montreal-based CN to buy the EJ&E from U.S. Steel Corp. for \$300 million. But the board also imposed conditions on the purchase that will help offset the environmental impact on towns through which the EJ&E runs.

The ruling becomes official Jan. 23, and CN expects to close on the transaction after that.

The EJ&E runs in an arc from Waukegan to Joliet to northwest Indiana, passing through DuPage County in Bartlett and West Chicago, among other towns. Since it announced the proposed purchase in September 2007, CN has contended that it will reduce congestion by shifting trains from its crowded existing lines to the less-used EJ&E.

Many towns along the line banded together to oppose the purchase, but in recent weeks several have negotiated individual agreements with CN to mitigate the negative effects of the purchase. Bartlett and West Chicago did not reach deals.

"CN is now a stakeholder in Bartlett and in our neighboring suburbs," Village President Catherine Melchert said in a written statement. "We can only hope that they will step up and accept their newfound responsibility to the municipalities in this region."

The EJ&E intersects West Bartlett and Stearns roads west of Route 59. The average number of trains that will use the line through Bartlett will quadruple and the gross tons of daily freight will increase by more than 600 percent, according to the Surface Transportation Board's environmental impact statement.

The village plans to continue negotiating with CN to limit blockages at crossings, give the village the authority to fine CN for excessive blockages, discontinue or limit use of a switching yard near West Bartlett Road, and build underpasses at West Bartlett and Stearns roads, along with several other conditions.

Several communities said the increase in train traffic would create the need for an underpass or overpass at EJ&E

crossings, but CN will be required to help foot the bill for only two. The railway will have to pay most of the cost of building underpasses at Ogden Avenue in Aurora and Lincoln Highway in Lynwood.

The railway will be required to install video cameras to monitor rail traffic near two fire stations in West Chicago and the new fire station in Bartlett.

West Chicago officials said they are now regrouping to decide how to proceed.

"None of us are happy about it," Deputy Mayor Ruben Pineda said. "We're going to try to fight this as much as we can."

An opposition group called The Regional Answer to Canadian National will meet next month to discuss the next step, Pineda said.

The STB will monitor CN's compliance with the conditions of the purchase for the next five years.

For towns along the existing CN lines, the purchase will mean fewer delays at rail crossings and fewer train whistles blowing in the middle of the night.

North Riverside, for example, will see two or three fewer trains per day, Village Administrator Guy Belmonte said.

While it's not a dramatic decrease, "it still makes for a little better lifestyle for people here," he said.

In August, the village hosted a rally with U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-3rd District, of Western Springs and leaders from other communities who supported the deal.

"North Riverside is happy that the purchase went through," Belmonte said. "We're not giving our problem to someone else; we're just sharing it. ... I think it's going to be good for everyone."